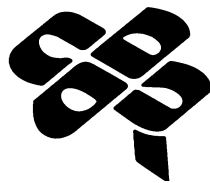


Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd



School Co-operatives

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School Co-operatives

In 1996 there were 2373 schools in Victoria providing educational services for five to 18 year olds – 1700 government and 673 non-government schools. There were 777,367.9 E.F.T students enrolled in all Victorian schools – 517,882.5 in government schools, 176,132.9 in Catholic schools and 83,352.5 in independent schools.

Choice is fundamental to co-operative values and principles.¹ While supporting existing regulated diversity in the education system, we believe that there is an opportunity for further diversification in the ownership and control of schools.

The Commonwealth Government has released a **Schools Funding: Consultation Report** which has argued: "For choice to be meaningful, however, an adequate level of school autonomy, creating possibilities for diversity is essential. Again, accountability for outcomes requires appropriate authority to produce these outcomes at the school level. Schools must be able to develop their own particular strengths, teaching styles, institutional ethos and activities if they are to match parents "values and children" educational strengths or needs." ²

The Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd supports parental, teacher and student choice – a choice between co-operative, public and private providers. Indeed, we also support the need for courses that provide students with appropriate information on different business models – co-operative, private and public. ³

The establishment of the Schools of the Third Millennium Project by the Victorian Government is creating an opportunity to examine how choice can be enhanced in our school system and in particular in the governing structures of schools. Within the Project the Autonomous Schools Working Group has these terms of reference:

- To articulate the strength of the Schools of the Future model and seek the means of further building on those strengths. This includes the investigation of overseas models where appropriate.
- To devise ways of creating greater diversity within a strengthened government school system
- To devise the means, by which schools can, if they wish, accept more authority at the local level, subject to appropriate accountability.
- To facilitate closer links between schools/industry and commerce.
- To make recommendations on different models of governance, having regard to the outcomes of the work of Groups One and Three.

On the 8 April 1998 the Victorian Minister for Education, Mr. P. Gude, announced a move towards self-governing schools.

The Federation

The Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd was formed in 1970 by co-operatives that identified and sought to promote three major issues vital to the survival and growth of co-operatives:

- The need for a united body to represent Victorian co-operatives to Government
- To facilitate education and training
- To foster the development of co-operatives

The membership of the Federation includes Aboriginal, agricultural marketing and services, business services, child care, community services, credit, dairy manufacturing, education, energy, fishing, health, housing, retail and taxi co-operatives.

Our mission is to develop and promote the co-operative movement as a means of satisfying the economic and social needs of people.

Our objectives are:

- Help members improve services to their members by providing information and advice.
- Make representations to government on legislation and policies to facilitate the development of co-operatives.
- Promote co-operatives to the public.
- Facilitate and promote the formation of co-operatives.
- Educate co-operative members and the community at large in co-operative principles and practices.
- Facilitate co-operation between co-operatives.

Stakeholders

A preliminary question before discussing the status quo governing arrangements for schools and the potential for the co-operative option, is consideration of who are the stakeholders in the school system. Stakeholders are those who stand to lose or gain as a result of an organization's actions or its inaction.

Applying this concept to schools we can identify eleven groups of stakeholders:

- Employees
- Parents
- Students
- Government
- Pre-school institutions
- Tertiary institutions
- Suppliers
- The local community
- Future employers
- Society at large
- Past and future generations

The stakeholder approach is based on the need to take account of the interests of all stakeholder groups – as an alternative to including some groups and excluding other groups. This approach also recognises that within and between stakeholder groups there may be different aims for schools.

But, then, it can also be further argued that while schools have eleven groups of stakeholders it is possible to further refine this into identifying the cardinal stakeholder group i.e. those for whose benefit a school primarily exists.

The Status Quo

The development of Victoria's schools is based on what the Government has called Schools of the Future. The overall aim of Schools of the Future is to improve the quality of education for students by moving to schools the responsibility to make decisions, set priorities and control resources. The logical outcome of this approach is that schools should have a choice in their governing structure.

Schools of the Future does not, however, give schools the option of choosing their governing structure – including the co-operative model.⁴ This is despite a key focus of the policy is that quality outcomes of schooling can only be assured when decision-making takes place at the local level.

Government schools in Victoria have a School Council – a body corporate constituted under Section 13 of the Education Act 1958. At present, the role of the School Council has been described as providing “a forum for the needs of the local community to merge with the Government’s responsibilities in state education.

There is a long history of parental and community involvement in schools in Victoria. Local committees were, for example, established for each school in 1862 with three, six or nine persons – with two thirds locally nominated and voted for by ratepayers. Parents had a double vote.⁵ These committees managed schools and appointed and dismissed teachers and were criticised for excessive and uncontrolled authority.⁶ In 1872 they were replaced by school boards which controlled several schools. The boards were elected by ratepayers for a three-year period and could advise on condition of buildings, use of school buildings after hours, furniture requirements and the need for new buildings. There was conflict, however, with boards who wanted executive and not advisory powers and the increasing centralisation of control by the Education Department.⁷ In 1911 local school committees replaced the boards.⁸

Within statewide guidelines, School Councils today can determine school policy in a range of educational and resource areas.”⁹ Under the Education Act (1958) School Councils are charged with responsibility for:

- Curriculum policy
- Resourcing the school (including financial management)
- Environmental development (both physical & social)
- Accountability to the local community & the DOE
- Management of goals and policies
- Promoting interest in the school
- Selection of the School Principal¹⁰

These Council powers include:

- Canteen management
- Employment of non teaching staff
- Construction works contracts
- Use of school facilities by other individuals or bodies
- Fund raising
- Purchase of equipment
- Student code of conduct
- Coordination of all parent activities in the school¹¹

School Councils are able to establish co-operative societies to establish amenities but not reinvent their schools as co-operatives. What this paper argues is that schools could become co-operatives with existing school councils replaced by a board of directors. In 1953 the first co-operative was established at a school to develop an amenity - MHS Co-operative Society Ltd. The co-operative was established to enable Melbourne High School to build a swimming pool and a physical education centre.¹² The success of the co-operative led the Government to advocate and schools to establish more co-operatives to develop amenities.¹³

The Minister may give directions and issue guidelines to a School Council. School Councils are regulated by the Education Act, Regulations and a Constituting Order. Decision-making of the School Councils takes place within the framework of legislated powers and Directorate of School Education policy. How these provide a prescriptive framework that precludes school autonomy and independence is detailed in the Schools of the Future Reference Guide¹⁴ e.g.

- Section 6.151 prescribes the type of school structure.
- Section 6.16 prescribes Departmental approval for research before schools are approached.
- Section 7.9 prescribes purchasing procedures for schools.
- Section 7.18.13 prescribes procedures for the school – community interface and the need for Ministerial approval.
- Section 7.18.8 prescribes when children’s services centre proposals require Ministerial approval.

The Councils have between six and 15 members with three categories of membership – parent, employee and community members. Parent members must make up more than one third of the total membership of the council. Employee members must make up no more than one third of the total membership of the Council and must be employed by the Directorate of School Education and be either a parent of a student at the school or employed at and for the school for a period of eight hours or more per week. Community members may be provided for in the Constituting Order of a council and are invited to become members because they can make a valuable contribution to its work. Representatives from such groups as students, community members, local business people, tertiary or pre-school institutions or parent associations can be co-opted.¹⁵ These provisions, therefore, are implicitly based on a stakeholder approach. The documentation about School Councils, however, does not explicitly adopt a stakeholder approach and justify the basis for the three categories and their differing levels of representation.

Charter Schools

In the USA the charter school movement is demonstrating the possibilities for independence

within the public system - providing an interesting model for the future development of existing State schools in Victoria. By the beginning of 1998 there were 784 charter schools operating in 23 States, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia in the USA. A further 143 schools had been approved to open and there were at least 241 applications under consideration.

Charter schools are publicly funded autonomous schools yet accountable for their results - deriving their existence from State legislation which since 1991 has allowed educators and local communities to develop the schools. The theory of charter schools is that freeing public schools from state and local bureaucratic control would hasten educational innovation, create greater parental involvement and facilitate improvements to public education.

In Colorado, for instance, charter schools propose their governing structure and this is submitted for approval. The schools have authority over curriculum, personnel, budget and all other matters.¹⁶

The growth of charter schools has been rapid. In Colorado, the number of charter schools increased from two in 1993-94 to 50 in 1997-98.¹⁷ With rapid growth there have been difficulties. After studying 37 new start-up charter schools, the Hudson Institute has reported that start-up problems are widespread and daunting - identifying school governance tensions and turmoil, a lack of money or inadequate money management, trouble attracting and sometimes retaining enough students intended to serve, difficulty engaging enough suitable teachers and other staff and difficulties in obtaining suitable facilities.¹⁸

The governance of the charter schools varies. In some States such as Alaska, Georgia and Wyoming the schools do not have legal autonomy. In other States such as Arizona, New Hampshire and Florida the schools do have legal autonomy. In some States such as California, Colorado, Texas and Massachusetts legal autonomy is either negotiable or applicable to some charter schools but not others. Proposed changes to existing charter school legislation in Wisconsin will enable legal autonomy of charter schools - including co-operatives with teachers and parents as members. A minority of the charter schools established in the USA are structured as co-operatives e.g. Santa Barbara Charter School (California) and the Micanopy Area Cooperative School (Florida). In Minnesota the schools have to be structured as a co-operative or non-profit organisation.

The development of charter schools in the USA must also be considered in the context of School Boards. There are 97,000 School Boards in the USA - responsible for educating 52 million students in more than 15,000 school districts, employing more than 5 million workers and controlling nearly \$US 300 billion annually. Over 97% of the School Boards are elected. The Boards Govern the School Districts and typically have five to seven members. Anyone can stand for election to a School Board - not just the 26% who have children at school.

The Co-operative Option

A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

The principles of co-operation are:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training and Information

6. Cooperation among Cooperatives
7. Concern for Community

1. Voluntary and Open Membership. Cooperatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

2. Democratic Member Control. Cooperatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women²⁰ April 1998 serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and cooperatives at other levels are organised in a democratic manner.

3. Member Economic Participation. Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. They usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing the cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4. Autonomy and Independence. Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.

5. Education, Training and Information. Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of cooperation.

6. Cooperation among Cooperatives. Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

7. Concern for Community. While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members.

Co-operatives have existed in Australia for over 100 years, and a number formed early this century still exist today. A co-operative is often formed in response to market or government failures or imbalances. Small consumers, producers and businesses are often at a disadvantage in dealing with or competing against larger corporations. A co-operative gets its strength by group action. By working together, people and businesses gain market strength by combining resources and influences to achieve results and benefits that cannot be effectively achieved individually.

A co-operative is an incorporated enterprise that is owned and controlled by the persons who use its services. Membership of a co-operative is voluntary, and is usually based upon a specific group of persons who have a unifying interest. Members can include individuals and/or corporate bodies.

Co-operatives in Australia are governed by state legislation. A new national legislative scheme for regulating co-operatives is presently being put into place by state and territory governments. Queensland, Victoria and NSW have recently enacted new co-operatives legislation, with the remaining states adopting new acts over the coming year. Co-operatives will now have similar powers and responsibilities as companies.

Co-operatives have played a major role in the development of many primary industries, including dairy, sugar, fishing, fruit and vegetables, wool, rice, and cotton. Small businesses have also formed co-operatives to gain an advantage in the market. In Victoria, co-operatives have been

formed by travel agents, florists, chemists, architects, lawyers, taxi owners, and nurseries.

A co-operative is a business in its own right. It is subject to the same market conditions and legal requirements as other businesses with differing objects and structures. A co-operative needs to conduct its affairs in a business like manner if it is to provide benefits to its member.

Co-operative Models & Precedents

There are various co-operative models that could be adopted by schools:

- A school could be converted into or established as a co-operative. There are already models of independent co-operative schools in Victoria - Coonara Community School, Triple R School Co-operative Limited, Learning Co-operative Primary School, Merrivale Independent Primary School Co-operative, Malvern Community School Co-operative Ltd and Fitzroy Community School. An example of stakeholder model is the Mondragon co-operatives in Spain. The student work experience co-operative, Alecop, has its supervisory board made up of three stakeholders with equal numbers of staff, students and parents.¹⁹ In California, USA, there are 320 co-operative nursery schools with 10,000 member families. The first co-operative nursery school was established in Chicago in 1915 and the first in California in Berkeley in 1929.
- A group of schools could form co-operatives to share services. PACERS Co-operative in Alabama, USA, is an association of 29 small public schools located in rural communities. The Prairie Lakes Educational Cooperative in South Dakota, USA, was formed on 1 July 1993 and has member-schools with 6600 students. Services include staff training, purchasing, staff networking and psychological services.
- Co-operatives could be formed to provide services to schools. In New York State there are 38 Boards of Cooperative Educational Services which work together to provide educational and business services for schools more economically than each could achieve for itself e.g. administrative services, teacher recruitment, staff development, employee benefits and insurance. Purchasing Victoria Co-operative Ltd was established in 1989 originally to serve local government. The co-operative has contracted providers of products and services to enable its members to get better services and deals. The products and services include computer hardware and software, fire protection equipment, human resources and training, library supplies, office equipment and stationery. Membership is open to government authorities, semi-government, councils, charitable organisations, community-based organisations and co-operatives.
- Student co-operatives. Student co-operatives have been formed in schools and universities throughout the world to create savings, cultivate school gardens, provide books and stationery and operate canteens or cafeterias. - nearly 800 in Sri Lanka, 110 in the State of Rajasthan, India and over 150 in Japan. Australia does have some student co-operatives which provide books.

Autonomous School Working Group

The Schools for the Third Millennium Autonomous Schools Working Group has raised these specific questions:

- Given the importance of the School Council to our system, are there issues relating to current structure, flexibility of membership, terms of office and capacity to co-opt expertise that warrant consideration?
- School Councils have significant responsibility under the Schools of the future model. Are there additional responsibilities/powers that School Councils should be able to access (if they wish) in areas of financial/personnel management or in other areas?
- If some School Councils were empowered to take on more responsibility to varying degrees, how would the nature of their accountability to the Minister need to be reshaped?
- All Schools follow the curriculum program of our State. Alongside that some schools have indicated an interest in being able to develop a particular area of expertise. In what ways should that be considered for incorporation into our system?
- It is increasingly important for schools to link more closely with the community and local business/commerce. What strategies and principles need to be in place for all concerned to gain from those links?
- If the capacity were provided for schools to establish formal clusters across our usual divisions, for example Primary/Primary, Primary/Secondary or Secondary/TAFE, what issues would need to be considered in terms of governance and what advantages could flow to communities interested in such a path?

Given the importance of the School Council to our system, are there issues relating to current structure, flexibility

ity of membership, terms of office and capacity to co-opt expertise that warrant consideration?

Schools should have the flexibility to determine their own structure, membership, terms of office and have the capacity to co-opt expertise. What is important is not the School Council itself but how it enables stakeholders to become decision-makers. The issue, then, is the options for stakeholder decision-making that would include School Councils but also boards of co-operative schools.

School Councils have significant responsibility under the Schools of the future model. Are there additional responsibilities/powers that School Councils should be able to access (if they wish) in areas of financial/personnel management or in other areas?

Schools should have the discretion to determine additional financial and personnel management responsibilities and powers but this would have to be with the voluntary agreement of affected stakeholders and needs to be considered within the context of governing structure arrangements. The stress on "if they wish" is critically important.

If some School Councils were empowered to take on more responsibility to varying degrees, how would the nature of their accountability to the Minister need to be reshaped?

Taking on more responsibility does not change accountability to the Minister. It is important, however, that schools have a choice about additional responsibilities and that these are not artificially induced through policies and programs. Schools should have the option of adopting a co-operative structure with a board – instead of a School Council.

All Schools follow the curriculum program of our State. Alongside that some schools have indicated an interest in being able to develop a particular area of expertise. In what ways should that be considered for incorporation into our system?

Schools should be able to develop particular areas of expertise. In addition, there is a need to consider broader flexibility in curriculum development and provision. Charter schools in the USA have to clearly state and identify student outcomes. In California, all charter schools are required to administer the same statewide assessments and performance standards as other schools.

It is increasingly important for schools to link more closely with the community and local business/commerce. What strategies and principles need to be in place for all concerned to gain from those links?

Local schools should determine these links within guidelines. Schools should be required to develop links with the community and local business/commerce but the nature of these links should not be prescribed. The autonomy and independence of schools should not be jeopardised by links with the community and local business/commerce and this should be the overriding principle governing these links. School co-operatives as part of a broad co-operative movement have natural links with the community and local co-operative business/commerce.

If the capacity were provided for schools to establish formal clusters across our usual divisions, for example Primary/Primary, Primary/Secondary or Secondary/TAFE, what issues would need to be considered in terms of governance and what advantages could flow to communities interested in such a path?

Clusters are desirable if sought by the different parties and justified on economic and social grounds. Schools should be encouraged to form clusters if they consider this is desirable. Clusters should not, however, be artificially induced through policies and programs. The most appropriate governing structure for a cluster would be a co-operative. Each member of the cluster would have one vote and the independence and autonomy of each member would be protected.

Conclusion

In announcing Self Governing Schools on the 8 April 1998, the Victorian Minister for Education, Phil Gude, said: "What this initiative is about is 'empowerment'. Empowering local school communities to be their best and to offer an exemplary education to our young people." The

Minister said that the school councils would:

- Have the power to directly employ staff.
- Be able to co-opt members with specialised skills.
- Better set priorities.
- Enter into partnerships with business, TAFE or other institutions.

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Resources

The following publications are also available from the Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd:

- Co-operatives and Public Policy
- Privatisation of Co-operatives
- Shared Services Co-operatives for Community Agencies
- The Co-operative Model